Like Climbing Everest 'Because It's There'

New Orleans DA Views JFK Probe As an Irresistible 'Opportunity'

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NEW ORLEANS, Feb. 23. "There is a certain tendency to climb where opportunity presents itself," says District Attorney Jim Garrison. "It is somewhat like the reason men try to climb Everest—because it is there."

The hulking 6-foot 6-inch Garrison has been climbing energetically in his investigation of widely publicized suspicions that a plot hatched here resulted in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Garrison's case got a Nationwide bath of publicity yesterday with the sudden death of David M. Ferrie, 49, a flight-school instructor and sometime private investigator once questioned for suspected complicity in the assassination.

Another self-described private eye, David F. Lewis, 26, added piquancy to the foul play theory today by rushing into the District Attorney's office to "find out whether I should leave town."

Lewis, a garrulous freight agent, says he had met Lee Harvey Oswald in New Orleans four times and claims to know the names of four or five persons involved in the alleged plot to kill the President.

He was whisked off summarily into a waiting elevator by an employe of the District Attorney's office before he could say another word.

In another part of the Criminal Court building, Orleans Parish Coroner Nicholas Chetta virtually ruled out the possibility of murder in Ferrie's death.

Garrison mysteriously announced to newsmen that "for reasons I can't go into, there is no question about the fact that it is a suicide." He said he had been planning to arrest Ferrie "next week."

The coroner said he could still establish no more than that Ferrie died of a cerebral hemorrhage, a ruptured blood vessel at the base of the brain. While the District Attorney blamed the death on "something taken internally," the coroner said no drugs could have caused the hemorrhage, except perhaps by causing a violent retching or

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reaction that, in turn, ruptured the blood vessel.

Dr. Chetta said he hoped for some preliminary findings from toxicological tests soon in an effort to determine whether drugs played any role in Ferrie's death.

The doctor also told newsmen that Ferrie "could" have died around 4 a.m. or even a bit later Wednesday morning.

He had said earlier that an autopsy performed at the parish (county) morgue indicated Ferrie had died Tuesday "evening," a term that in Southern parlance stretches into the night. I left Ferrie's apartment after a rambling 4-hour interview shortly before 4 a.m. and shook hands with him at the door as I left. Ferrie and I each had only a cup of coffee during the interview.

Dr. Chetta noted that there are "tremendous variables" in fixing a time of death. He said there were "no signs of violence or any traumatic injury that might have caused the hemorrhage.

Medical science will be unable to determinew hether Ferrie might have taken any drug purposefully to set off a hemorrhage. A typewritten note, unsigned and undated, was found on a dining room table in Ferrie's flat in which he asid he found life "loathesome."

'Down On Society'

David Snyder, a reporter for the New Orleans States & Item who interviewed Ferrie last week and spoke with him over the phone Tuesday evening, said he suspected it may have been written then.

"He was down on society, felt that there was no justice," Snyder said. "But through the week he perked up, talking about a lawsuit, getting involved in the investigation. He was almost jovial."

Suicide or natural causes, Ferrie's death stands out as a macabre note in an already bizarre investigation. It has produced promises of arrests and convictions from Garrison, but so far little by way of concrete results. The District

United Press International

DAVID F. LEWIS

. . . vanishes over night

Attorney has blamed the local press for tipping his hand.

The FBI clearly expects him to fall on his face.

Garrison opened the investigation last fall, a few weeks after his public image as "the Perry Mason of New Orleans" went into decline. In a move sharply criticized by the Metropolitan Crime Commission, Garrison won a pardon for a Bourbon Street Stripper, Linda Brigette, whom he described as "an unjustly convicted mother of small children . . ."

She had been convicted of lewd dancing in two trials prosecuted by Garrison's office and sentenced to two 30-day jail terms but Garrison subsequently said he decided on the basis of what other spectators told him that the gyrations were not obscene.

The District Attorney acknowledged that Miss Brigette had "been kept out of jail purely and simply by the intercession of my office" but scoffed at Crime Commission allegations that organized crime was involved in the clemency as "the silliest thing to come along since the Flat Earth Society's last press release."

The response was characteristic of the District Attorney, who believes that the best defense is a good offense. In a showdown with Criminal Court judges shortly after he was elected in 1962 over use of a court fine and fee fund for his vice investigations, Garrison suggested there were "racketeer influences" at work on the judges.

It is impossible to discern what evidence Garrison has at hand in his investigation of the Kennedy assassination. He has vowed to prosecute both "conspirators" and "accessories after the fact" who failed to volunteer important information.

But sources close to the investigation seem to feel that Garrison is likely to come up at most with charges against perhaps four or five individuals, presumably Cuban, who might have heard Oswald threaten to assassinate the President.

Said an official of the Dade County (Miami) State Attorney's office, where Garrison's men have gone on various forays: "My theory on this is that what they have is a bunch of guys who are sitting around in New Orleans talking about killing people.

"If they got four or five guys sitting around talking and one turns State's evidence, they'll probably convict them too. After all this was a President."

Extremists' Topic

The talk of a presidential assassination was apparently Topic A in extremist circles in the days before Kennedy was shot down on Nov. 22, 1963.

In Miami, for example, which Kennedy visited before

he went to Dallas, investigators working on a bombing case picked up a tape-recorded conversation from "a Ku Klux Klan type" about the possibility of going to a high building with a rifle along the route of some Presidential motorcade.

"We probably could have woven something like this (Garrison's investigation) out of the same thing we had," a Miami official stated.

Ferrie's role in the investigation here remains unclear. He said before he died that he never met Oswald and never been to Cuba, but Garrison called him "one of history's most important individuals."

Ferrie had been arrested as a fugitive from Texas several days after the assassination and questioned about reports that he might have been a "getaway pilot" for the Presidential assassin.

A combination of psychologist, poet, philosopher and linguist, Ferrie declared that he had been checked out thoroughly by the FBI and found to have played no role, a claim that appears to have been sustained by the FBI.

[Sources in Washington said the Warren Commission had investigated and cleared Ferrie of any connection with the assassination, United Press International reported.]

A bald man with a red wig glued on his head, Ferrie had been arrested in New Orleans before. He had been charged in 1961 in Jefferson Parish with a crime against nature involving a 15-year-old boy and indecent behavior involving three juveniles. Police at the time said he apparently lured juveniles with alcohol, hypnotism, and the adventure of flying.

Although Ferrie told me that he had "never been to Cuba," one of the officers involved in the 1961 arrest said one juvenile told them he had flown to Cuba with Ferrie on different occasions.